

February 28, 2023

To the Members the Housing Committee:

My name is Sara Swetzoff and I am writing in support of Senate Bill 4. I'm currently a resident of Bloomfield. **I connected with the CT Tenants Union in fall 2021 when I faced a dramatic rent hike that displaced myself, my daughter, and many of our neighbors from our 12-unit apartment building in West Hartford.**

I moved to Connecticut to stay with extended family about two and a half years ago in June 2020 when I lost income due to the pandemic. My daughter was subsequently placed at the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford. As a Deaf child with complex disabilities, it is the only school in the state that meets her needs. In my previous city of residence, she had to bus an hour across the city to reach her school. I was determined not to repeat that hardship, despite what I heard about pricey rents in West Hartford. **I believe that every family with disabled and/or elderly loved ones should have the right to affordable housing close to essential service providers.**

It was a huge relief in January 2021 to find a reasonably priced older building off Farmington Avenue in West Hartford just a few minutes drive from American School for the Deaf. We lived with two housemates in a shared apartment in order to stay within budget while I finished my doctorate and worked part-time as an adjunct professor. I planned carefully so that I could afford to live close to my daughter's school during this time of transition as I worked towards my professional goals.

**However, due to a lack of rent cap laws and protection against no cause evictions, our home was soon at risk.** In October 2021, a neighbor moved out due to a persistent leak in her 3rd floor unit. She reported the building, which subsequently garnered a number of citations from the West Hartford Health District. One month later, the longtime landlord sold the building instead of scheduling the necessary repairs.

The new landlord told us that our rent, then \$1775, should go up to \$2400 – a 35% increase. The landlord argued this was market rent, and that furthermore they needed to cover the cost of repairs – the repairs that the previous landlord neglected for decades while living in a mansion in Florida. **Is it fair that tenants residing in the building for only a year or two should bear the cost of decades of neglect?**

I noticed that one family, a single mom with two kids, mysteriously moved out immediately after the building sale, perhaps breaking lease early after being intimidated by similar conversations with the landlord about the impending rent hike. Another family filed with the Fair Rent commission after the landlord told them their rent would increase from \$1500 to \$2000, but the commission was only willing to limit the increase to about 12%. The family left because \$200-\$250 a month was too much of an increase for them to justify staying. **This is why S.B. 4 needs rent cap language that limits annual increases to 2.5% or 3% at the most: I have observed that any higher increases will cause displacement, starting with the most vulnerable families and individuals.**

As for our unit, the new landlords told us in writing that we could have a two year lease, but changed their mind after the neighbors filed with the Fair Rent Commission. Our unit considered filing with the Fair Rent Commission but we were quite concerned about retaliation. **Without legal protection from no-cause eviction, we knew our lease renewal could be denied for no reason.** This was an incredibly stressful stretch of time when we were all unsure what would happen next and if we would be able to stay in our home.

The new landlord refrained from fixing any of the broken cabinets that had been cited by the Health District in our unit. Their strategy was clearly to try to get as many of the current tenants to leave as possible, so that they could make limited updates to the units then re-rent the units to a new clientele at 35% more. **This is why an effective rent cap provision in S.B. 4 must apply to increases between tenants: we have to end this incentive to push out tenants through lease non-renewal and purposeful neglect of repairs.**

By July 2022 when I moved out, over half of the units had emptied and turned over. We had negotiated our rent hike down to “only” 12%, but I was profoundly demoralized by the likelihood that the landlord could very well put us through the same stress once again the following year. Would we get another 12% hike just twelve months later? Would they decide to end our lease for no reason? **How can individuals and families plan for the future and work towards our goals if we have no idea whether we can even afford to stay in our current housing a year from now?**

The anxiety and disempowerment of these unknowns spurred me to move out and seek more stable housing. **At this time, I observed that rent hikes were sweeping through the city like a second pandemic.** Two of the Hartford apartment buildings where I checked out units in July 2022 had been sold and significantly raised rent by the time I returned from my summer research grant and circled back to sign a lease in September. Facing limited options, I kept my possessions in storage for nearly six months while I continued searching.

As of January 2023, I now reside in a shared, owner-occupied home in Bloomfield. I was very lucky to make a trustworthy new friend who recently purchased a home and needed a housemate. Many others do not have this luck or privilege. However, I now reside considerably further from the American School for the Deaf.

**For my family, adding rent cap provisions to SB4 is a matter of disability justice, but rent caps are also essential to racial justice in our state.** I noticed that the displacements from my building disproportionately impacted African American families. Two out of three units occupied by African American families were vacated as a result of this change in ownership and the ensuing rent hike.

For all of the reasons mentioned above, it is imperative that the Housing Committee vote S.B. 4 out of committee and add strong rent cap provisions to the bill. In order to achieve real housing stability for Connecticut residents, these provisions must limit annual increases to 2.5%, prevent rent hikes in between tenants, and ban no-cause evictions.

Thank you for reading.